

Nietzsche and Christian Values

This essay will discuss Nietzsche's controversial revaluation and critique of Christian values. Nietzsche, as a moral critic of culture, was principally committed to the historical and intellectual process of revaluation of values. His erudite work indicates that his radical critique is rooted in his own interpretation of historical Christianity and Christian values.

Nietzsche articulates his intellectual project and says that 'we need a *critique* of moral values, *the value of these values themselves must first be called in question*'. This critique of moral values, or of the value of moral values, requires considerable 'knowledge of the conditions and circumstances in which they grew, under which they evolved and changed'. This particular knowledge is necessary because people have taken these values as 'given, as factual, as beyond all question'. In this respect, Nietzsche was concerned with the historical and cultural origin of prevalent values, with the revaluation of moral values with their concomitant value for life. Yet, Nietzsche's revaluation is largely formulated by the sceptic idea that morality is an intricate deception and that truth is a fiction. Nietzsche thinks that the ultimate truth is that there is no truth.

Nietzsche was influenced by historical situations and European thinkers, such as Arthur Schopenhauer and David Strauss, and lived in a country that proclaimed its prevailing values to be Christian. As a cultural and historical critic of values, Nietzsche thought that it was inevitable to reevaluate Christian values because of their immense effect on his contemporary world. This was carried out by criticising the epistemological and cultural roots of Christian values which, according to Nietzsche, were out of touch with factual reality. 'In Christianity', he says, 'neither morality nor religion come into contact with reality'. This supposed detachment from worldly reality makes the Christian ideas of 'sin', 'redemption', 'grace', 'punishment' and 'forgiveness of sins' 'imaginary *effects*'. They are imaginary, not 'real', in a mythical sense, for the Christian religion creates a 'purely fictitious world', not because of its unworldly disengagement, but rather because it 'falsifies, disvalues and denies reality'. The question to be considered here is: How can Christianity deny reality in spite of its tremendous impact on the real world? Nietzsche is aware of this question and, for instance, makes rather a curious comparison between Christianity and Buddhism. In contrast to Christianity, Buddhism, according to Nietzsche, is more realistic and does not speak of 'the struggle against sin' but of 'the struggle against

suffering'. Does this mean that the Christian 'struggle against sin' is not real?

Nietzsche thinks that the essential problem of Christian values is that Christianity 'demanded faith and nothing but faith, and passionately rejected the desire for reason'. This indicates that Christian values are essentially irrational because they are based on faith, not on reason. The other crucial issue is that Christianity is not to make 'man' more moral in this world but rather to let him feel '*as sinful as possible*'. 'Christianity', Nietzsche says, 'had said that each man is conceived and born in sin'. The Christian feeling of sinfulness let 'the instincts of the subjugated and oppressed come into the foreground: it is the lowest classes which seek their salvation in it'. Thus historical Christianity embodied a 'certain sense of cruelty'; 'hatred of those who think differently'; 'the will to persecute'. It is interesting that Nietzsche provides a historical reason for this Christian 'cruelty', 'hatred' and 'persecution'. He says that 'Christianity needed *barbarous* concepts and values' in order to 'dominate' European 'barbarians'.

What is evident in such a criticism is that Nietzsche aims at going beyond the external superficiality of Christianity and its own self interpretation and examining the cultural, historical and psychological motivations which are the basic source of Christian values. Nietzsche thinks that 'Christianity wants to destroy, shatter, stun, intoxicate'. Christianity also affirms the wrong values for humanity and prefers weakness, a herd mentality and fabricated morality to strength, individual intelligence and honesty. It is also inimical to scientific inquiry and sensuality and replaces natural values with blind faith, self-deception and morbid piety.

The Christian idea that each person has an immortal soul and that all human souls are equal in the eyes of God is alluring and derives its power by appealing to anti-aristocratic sentiments of the lower classes, to individual egos and to the fear of death. In this respect, Nietzsche attacks Christian moral concepts which Christians consider to be perpetual and universal. For instance, Nietzsche criticises the value of pity and considers Christianity the religion of pity. This Christian pity has a depressing effect because it opposes the instinctive emotions which intensify human vitality. People are deprived of strength when they feel pity. In fact, the value of pity represents the human failures and the weak.

Nietzsche criticises the Christian value of hope and argues that those who suffer must be sustained by a hope that can never be contradicted by any reality or disposed by any fulfilment. He says that 'Sufferers have to be sustained by a hope which cannot be refuted by any actuality'. Thus Nietzsche thinks that hope is the worst of all evils because it prolongs the torments of humanity.

For Nietzsche, Christian values are the unhealthiest of any religion or thought because Christianity considers the human body and its natural senses as things to be reviled. This 'Christianity', Nietzsche argues, 'is the greatest example of such an aberration of the instincts'. What Nietzsche says is that Christianity perceives the human body merely as a recipient site for temptations and the senses as carnal mechanisms for precipitating the process of temptation. If the human soul is the means into heavens, then the human body is the vehicle into sinfulness. This irrational anti-sensuality in Christian thought leads to self-loathing and unhappiness. Thus Christian values represent the hatred of courage, freedom and pride as well as the hatred of the senses, sensual joy and happiness. They also sacrifice freedom, pride and self-confidence, for they engender denigration, subjugation and mortification. As Nietzsche says: 'the Christian faith is a sacrifice: a sacrifice of all freedom, all pride, all self-confidence of the spirit; at the same time, enslavement and self-mockery, self-mutilation'.

Nietzsche thinks that Christian values have an intimate relationship with resentment. He therefore criticises the theory of resentment which regards the moral glorification of mercy and brotherliness as a slave revolt in morals among the disadvantaged, either in their natural endowments or in their opportunities as determined by destiny. Thus the ethic of 'duty' is considered as a sequential product of repressed sentiments for retribution on the part of people who shift their sentiments because they are impotent and compelled to work and make money. They resent the way of life of the noble stratum who apparently live free of duties. Georg Stauth and Bryan S. Turner say that for Nietzsche, resentment in Christianity 'becomes a completely new form of domination: a denial of individual will and power'. It is, however, erroneous to portray the human need for a kind of salvation as something that evolved only among the unprivileged social classes, as a natural product of resentment or as the outcome of a slave revolt in morality.

One of the problems concerning Christian values, according to Nietzsche, is the emergence of a priestly class. Nietzsche argues that 'everything valuable *in itself*, becomes utterly valueless, *inimical* to value through the parasitism of the priest. The priest 'sanctifies' and 'denaturalises' 'the natural events of life, at birth, marriage, sickness, death'. He also 'disvalues, *dissanctifies* nature'. Thus Christian values are in fact 'priestly values'.

Nietzsche also examines the Christian idea of guilt and punishment to evaluate the psychological significance of Christian values. He argues that in the entire psychology of the Gospel the concept guilt and punishment is lacking. To Nietzsche, it was the early 'Christians', especially Paul, who were responsible for creating the dreadful concept of

guilt and punishment as a consequence to their ‘unchristian’ idea about Christ’s divinity, crucifixion, resurrection and salvation. This institutionalised religion had created a kind of self-goodness and self-righteousness. Nietzsche says that if man ‘previously thought he saw warnings, threats, punishments, and every kind of sign of divine anger in all occurrences, so now he *reads* divine goodness *into* his experience’. It was, however, very curious to Nietzsche to analyse the impact of the idea of Christ’s divinity and how this idea created immense intellectual elaboration. In this respect, Nietzsche says that ‘the paradoxical formula “god on the cross”’ ‘promised a revaluation of all values of antiquity’.

Nietzsche understands ‘values’ in their broadest sense that includes all aspects of human life and thus rejects the Christian idea that there are only moral values. To him, Christian values are the values of the weak. They serve the rhetorical interests of the weak or the enslaved lower classes, in a sense that they function as a suitable means by which the weak may assume the power of the strong. This anomalous venture is chiefly attained through the work of the priests who label the highest aspects of human spirit as sinful and the pitiful as virtuous. Christianity corrupted the people by the notion of pity for the downtrodden. This pity enfeebles the race and depletes the energy and strength of the weak. The notion of pity is ingrained in the Christian idea that the human individual possesses a congenital value or a soul. Thus Nietzsche regards the idea of the human being’s innate worth as ‘decadent’ because it disregards nature and institutes artificial categories and distinctions. The true value should be appraised and based on the greatest or the Platos, Aristotles and Alexander the Greats. The common human being, or the ‘herd animal’, has no inherent value.

In other words, Nietzsche thinks that Christianity, as ‘a piece of antiquity intruding out of distant ages’, was able to manipulate the harvest of ancient culture. For him, Christian morality is the product of the resentment of the inferior weak for that which is excellent and noble. He thinks that the resentment of the lower classes is a significant social evil. It seems that Nietzsche does not think that resentment could be justified even if it results in a revolt against the master classes. Moreover, the priestly class may allow the oppressed to release their frustration in a dynamic way that does not entail the destructive overthrow of the master classes. Nietzsche, however, thinks that even when the weak people overwhelm the strong they do not become strong because the values of the weak are unnatural. Nietzsche here does not explain how people can decide what is natural or unnatural. One may suppose that there are concealed rhetorical interests behind the generalised assessment of the weak and the strong.

Nietzsche's critique of Christian values illustrates an interactive relationship between religion and ideology. It is part of the criticism of 'a moral system which would disguise the real nature of power and passion behind a creed of insipid moral regulations'. This persuaded Nietzsche to argue that in Christianity the basic attributes of beauty, wealth, enjoyment and generosity are turned into attributes of evil. Nietzsche also thinks that Christianity had developed a culturally productive form of revenge in the doctrine of spiritual love. The German philosopher Max Scheler (1874-1928) disagrees and argues that the concept of Christian love is an expression of strength rather than weakness, an effect of vitality rather than decadence.

Nietzsche sought to expose the strong passions behind conventional Christian values. His revaluation is a serious endeavour to examine those Christian values which are considered 'absolute standards'. Christian values, far from being objective or divinely inspired expressions of good and evil, are subjective assessments of reality and reflect concealed rhetorical interests. Nietzsche attempts to identify and criticise these interests. In this respect, Nietzsche thinks that the problem of Christianity is that it 'posits an absolute God as the alternative, positive version of human values'.

Nietzsche presents a radical and courageous revaluation of Christian values. His brilliant intelligence lies in his persistent willingness to question the most fundamental assumption of right and wrong. He demonstrates that the Christian way of assessing the world is historically determined and that a Christian cultural system of values is constructed to fulfil the political and rhetorical interests of a certain class. His aim is to produce a moral code which would be suitable for someone of passion who had nevertheless gained control and direction over emotion. Eric Heller is of the opinion that Nietzsche sought to discover a tenable position in modern society which would be in some respects a re-writing of the Christian moral position as the antidote to nihilism. This 're-writing' laid the intellectual foundation for critical reflections upon religious, psychological, political, economic and cultural issues.

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